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Online news reports and reader interactivity: an exploratory study of the electronic bulletin board system in China

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**Online news reports and reader interactivity: An exploratory study of the electronic
bulletin board system in China**

by

Xinru Cheng

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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2006

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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ABSTRACT

Electronic Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) that allow online news readers to respond to specific stories offer a new way to increase interactivity between mass media and readers. In China, which has traditionally controlled information in all media, BBS systems permit readers to post responses directly after reading news items online. The purpose of this study was to examine one popular BBS in China to see the number of responses to news items, and the extent to which items that generated responses contained high levels of traditional news values. The study also examined a small group of studies that generated the highest responses in order to better understand what types of news trigger a large reader response. A composite week of top stories was examined across a number of topics. Results showed that more than 30,000 reader responses per day are being posted just to the top 100 news items on this single site. This number far exceeds more traditional methods of interaction such as letters to the editor. The top 10 news items per week had significantly higher levels of newsworthiness as defined by Pamela Shoemaker and her colleagues (statistical deviance, social deviance, etc.) than non-top-10 items. The majority of stories not in the top 10 lacked high levels of any of the six newsworthiness factors. Stories that triggered large responses tended to include themes about nationalism, sports heroes, or stories including strong cultural themes (such as a proposal to change a traditional holiday).

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Traditional mass media have been criticized for their lack of interactivity for a long time. Although call-ins and letters to journalists and editors have provided one means for audience members to respond to media, response rates typically have been very low. The New York Times receives an average of 60,000 letters to the editor each year, and the Times of London receives 150,000. While these are large numbers, they represent only 5 to 9 percent of the audience. In addition, newspapers frequently shorten or even reject submissions (Pasternack, 1978, p.9). Some researchers have urged newspapers to have more effective feedback systems (Rosen, 1991; Lacy, 1992; Merrit, 1998).

Perhaps in response to this need, the online environment has produced new and exciting possibilities for greater interactivity through dynamic feedback channels (Newhagen, 1997). The Internet could potentially change the ways in which people receive and respond to news and other information. It offers open forums for discussion on a wide variety of topics through the electronic bulletin board system, or BBS (Wanta, 2002). Many, including Keane (2000) and Papacharissi (2004) view this new technology as most promising for the growth of macro-public spheres, which connect individuals on a global or regional level.

The traditional mass media are primarily one-way channels (McQuail, 2000). Only an estimated 5 to 9 percent take the time and trouble to actively make their views known to media outlets via letters or phone calls (Pasternack, 1978; McKay & Rintel, 2001). However, “interactivity is one of the things that gives the Internet value as a medium” (Smith, 2005,

p.1). Interactivity provided by the Internet can facilitate dialogue between mass media and their audiences, providing the public with an outlet to express their opinions actively and openly. As Schaffer (2001) stated, journalism is not only about the stories that journalists want to tell readers but also about people reacting to or interacting with those stories.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which China's BBS system has increased audience interactivity by those getting their news from the websites. In addition to general response levels, the study will also examine the extent to which newsworthiness criteria often used by journalists to determine what stories run and how they are placed also might be used by responding readers. Do stories rating high in newsworthiness criteria lead to high levels of response by readers? Or do some other factors seem to be involved? A special qualitative analysis will also be undertaken of stories that seem to trigger very high levels of audience response.

The uniqueness of the media and communication environment in China may affect use of a Bulletin Board System. Although online discussion forums or newsgroups have been studied in the context of the United States, India, Chile and other countries (e.g. Ogan, 1993; Mitra, 1997; Tanner, 2001), China might provide a unique opportunity to study interactivity because of its carefully controlled media system.

Abbott and Yarbrough (1999) have concluded that how people learn things is dependent on the structure of the communication system in any given society. China, as one of the four remaining Communist countries in the world, still maintains an authoritarian, one-party system (Chen, 1999). Under this political-economic system, the main function of the media is to promote the policies of the leadership and to serve as instruments of social control. Although there have been signs in recent years that the country is moving fast

toward a more democratic and open system, freedom of speech is not widely encouraged. People lack a flexible channel by which they can express their opinions freely (Chen & Chan, 1998; Chu, 1994). Thus, electronic BBSs offer people an ideal method for publicly expressing their views.

According to China Internet Information Center (CNNIC), the first BBS site in China dates back to the early 1990s, when it attracted instant public notice. With the advent of low cost computers, easily available communication channels, and large network systems, the BBS has become more and more popular in China as a free channel for public opinion and has turned into a very important communication vehicle. The BBS is considered to be not just an information board, but an arena of discourse. Therefore, China offers a rare opportunity to study audience interactivity in cyberspace.

The earliest electronic BBSs were launched to publish public data such as stock information. They functioned as common bulletin boards like those found on roads and campuses to distribute or gather information. The modern electronic BBS does more than post bulletins on a notice board. It also provides services such as file transfer (FTP), e-mail, and online chat, like an online community. However, the popularity of BBS is largely attributed to its basic function of being an “online discussion forum” or “Internet forum” where there is better interactivity between media and readers.

The electronic BBS provides an online bulletin board for users to post messages and express their opinions on a wide array of topics. As described by Wanta (2002), the BBS is categorized into many columns according to different subjects, needs and user preferences. Usually, under a topic or special interest heading are various subheadings that are related to various issues of the day. Readers can choose to respond to the original headers or to the

messages posted by other participants. Then the conversation is marked with a date and time so that everyone knows when the dialog is taking place. Because the BBS is open to everyone and is free, it draws people from various backgrounds. As such, the BBS is a good place to find people with common interests and hobbies.

BBS sites in China use different names such as “forums (lun tan),” “online community” (wang shang she qu), or “users comments” (wang ping) according to the properties of the websites they are based on, but the function and principles are basically the same—making use of the interactivity stimulated by Internet technology to communicate in two ways or multiple ways. This study focuses on the BBS sites that are based on comprehensive news websites. Therefore, the topics of the discussion posted on a BBS would be expected to be closely related to news stories published lately on that site. Such news websites, as Sina ([www. news.sina.com.cn](http://www.news.sina.com.cn)) and Sohu (www. new.sohu.com), the most influential ones in China, have the largest number of BBS users. They collect and distribute news from all kinds of channels, including newspapers, magazines, and TV. The content includes local, national, and international news. These sites update their content very frequently with a refresh time of about every one hour (different websites may differ in refresh time). Because these sites offer timely and substantive information, they have a definite advantage over print media at this point, thus attracting millions of people. More important for interactivity, they provide a hyperlink for sending comments under each news item to encourage readers to express their opinions. They even have a top ten ranking for news stories that get the largest number of responses in each category each day, which facilitates the study of interactivity between mass media and the public.

Another characteristic of BBS is that it keeps the messages sent by all parties. This makes it possible to study interactivity as a communicative process (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001).

This study of China is a special case and may not be generalizable since Chinese society doesn't have a free media system like other countries do. However, more importantly, the China case is valuable because China is second only to the United States in the number of people online (111 million Internet users) according to the latest data from CNNIC. Therefore, the China setting provides a better platform where prominent online interactivity occurs. This study investigates what causes people to respond to the online news, which is meaningful to further understand interactivity as a communication concept in this new technology age. As the Internet continues to grow in popularity, investigations of content being sent online by users consequently increase in importance.

CHAPTER II

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

To establish a theoretical framework, this study includes the concepts of interactivity, newsworthiness, triggering effects, and the unique political-social system and media environment in China.

Interactivity

Over the last decade, the Internet has become one of the most popular vehicles facilitating a variety of communication and information-sharing tasks worldwide. With the growing popularity of Internet as a new medium of communication, “many traditional concepts in mass communication are being redefined, reworked, and reinvented” (Kiouisis, 2002, p.355) Interactivity is among those concepts. In recent year, interactivity is more associated with new communication technologies, especially the Internet (Lanham, 1993; Stromer, 2000).

However, definitions of interactivity are not agreed upon among researchers (Schultz, 2000; Downes & McMillian, 2000; Kiouisis, 2002; Smith, 2005). This might be because the concept of interactivity stems from different disciplines such as sociology and psychology, computer science, and communication studies. Jensen (1998) summarized that “While interaction in the sociological sense refers to a reciprocal relationship between two or more people and in the information sense refers to the relationship between people and machines, in communication studies it refers to the relationship between the text and the reader, and

also to reciprocal human actions and communication associated with the use of media as well as interaction via a medium” (p.190). Even in the communication area, this concept links mass and interpersonal communication (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997).

Rafaeli is one of the early investigators of interactivity in the mass media context. He provided a definition for interactivity in his 1988 study and later revised it to “the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages” in the 1997 study conducted with Sudweeks. Obviously, responsiveness is at the center of the Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) definition. This conceptual definition has been used in a number of studies (e.g. Schultz, 2000; Li, 1998). Rafaeli (1988 & 1997) distinguished three levels of interactivity: two-way (noninteractive) communication, reactive (or quasi-interactive) communication, and fully interactive communication, each level with higher responsiveness than the one before. In addition, he argued that interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium, but a process-related construct about communication.

For full interactivity to occur, communication roles need to be interchangeable. Rice (1984, p35) suggested “fully interactive media imply that the sender and receiver’s roles are interchangeable.” Rogers (1995, p314) expressed the same theme when he defined interactivity as “the degree to which participants in a communication process can exchange roles in and have control over their mutual discourse.”

While Rafaeli’s work focuses on the responsiveness or message relationship (Jensen, 1998; Kioussis, 2002), some scholars view interactivity as a multidimensional construct (e.g. Heeter, 1989, Ha & James, 1998; Downes & McMillan, 2000). Compared to Rafaeli’s more strict definition, Heeter’s dimensions allow the word “interactivity” to be applied in several

different ways (Smith, 2005). Heeter (1989) identified six dimensions of interactivity: (1) complexity of choice available; (2) effort that users must exert; (3) responsiveness of the user; (4) monitoring of information use; (5) ease of adding information; and (6) facilitation of interpersonal communication. Among these six dimensions, except for the responsiveness dimension, all are related to internal characteristics of the medium.

In the analysis of early business web sites, Ha and James (1998) proposed five dimensions: 1) playfulness, 2) choice, 3) connectedness, 4) information collection, and 5) reciprocal communication. Like Heeter, Ha & James (1998), and Downes & McMillan (2000) believed interactivity was a multi-faceted concept. Their definition of interactivity was based on six dimensions: direction of communication, time flexibility, sense of place, level of control, responsiveness, and perceived purpose of communication.

Some scholars see interactivity as a function of a medium itself (e.g. Heeter, 1989; Rust & Varki, 1996; Bucy, 2004). Snyder (1996) argues that certain technologies permit more interactivity than others. Generally, any new communication technology could be labeled interactive if it allows some degree of user responses (Kiousis, 2002). In this sense, compared to traditional media, such as TV and newspapers, which are typically one-way communication and low in interactivity, the Internet offers more potential for interactivity.

Morris & Ogan (1996) grouped four functional categories provided by Internet services. They were: (1) general asynchronous communication, which is characterized by the receiver's need for information and their information seeking behavior (e.g., web sites), (2) one-to-one asynchronous communication (e.g., e-mail), (3) many-to-many asynchronous communication (e.g., the BBS), and (4) one-to-one or one-to-many synchronous communication (e.g., chat rooms).

Even within the online environment, it is believed that the level of interactivity varies. For example, web sites, by providing search engines, pull-down menus, and hyperlinks, give readers the capacity to take a more active role in information consumption (Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001). The BBS, however, has a higher level of interactivity than this give-and-take process for its attributes of responsiveness, interchangeable roles, and the potential for many-to-many communication.

Other researchers investigated interactivity from a user perception perspective. Newhagen et al. (1995) operationalized interactivity as a perception of individuals and further argued that the interactivity level of a medium depends on the perceptions of people participating in the communication. McMillan (2000) examined interactivity from both an interactive process perspective and an individual perception perspective. Her study found that BBS and search engines were perceived to be most interactive, suggesting that two-way communication and control are key elements in understanding interactivity.

There are some other perspectives regarding interactivity, in which scholars discuss interactions between text and reader and distinguish interactivity between mediated human-human communication and human-machine communication (Jensen, 1998; Kioussis, 2002). As Schultz (2000, p.214) suggested, the BBS “increases the interactivity of the mass media overall by widening opportunities for reader-to-reader communication.” Those BBSs embodied in the sites of online versions of mass media have certain advantages over other online settings. Basically, the discussions on the BBS are related to the content of the mass medium--news stories, or previous messages sent by other readers. Nevertheless, sometimes BBS responses might also trigger discussions that go off in directions well beyond the news story itself.

Because interactivity can be studied in various areas from different perspectives, Downes and McMillan (2000) restated that interactivity is a multi-dimension construct and each of those dimensions seems to be represented by a continuum. Therefore, examination of interactivity must be narrowed. This study focuses on the responsiveness measure. Rather than argue what interactivity is or try to distinguish interactive communication from reactive communication, this study investigates levels and causes of interactivity in BBS, specifically, what causes people to respond to online news and to what extent the BBS has increased audience interactivity.

The Context of the Study: The China Situation

Various social, political, and economic factors affect the development and diffusion of new technologies, and in turn help change the social environment from which they stem (Rogers, 1995; Abbott & Yarbrough, 1999; He, 1997). This study considers the most immediate and noticeable factors that may influence interactive communication in the social environment: the political system and the media/communication environment.

The political system and media/communication environment in China

There is little doubt that governments of all countries exert at least some control over the mass media (Janus, 1984). The history of mass communication reveals that the most fundamental conflict in communication takes place between the perspectives of the established authorities and media demands for unrestricted freedom of expression (McQuail 1992). In this sense, the changing dynamics of mass communication occurred around conflicts between the government and the media.

In democratic nations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other developed Western countries, citizens and government are on equal terms. Freedom of the press is guaranteed. In authoritarian countries, such as the former Soviet Union and China, government has absolute control over its citizens. The media are manipulated by the government to shape public opinion (Almond & Powell, 1988).

Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and China are the four remaining communist countries in the world. The Chinese Communist Party and its government, a highly centralized hierarchical organization, penetrate the society extensively and control its institutions (Oksenberg, 2001). Under this political system, news is information that serves the interests of the government and advances its goals and policies (Chen, 1996). He (2004) indicated that in China, newspapers, magazines, television and radio outlets are all owned directly or indirectly by the government. Thus, the media serve mainly as tools of propaganda for the government.

Since it came to power in 1949, the Communist Party has successfully used its control of the mass media, through both direct control and punishment of erring journalists, to manipulate information flow in and out of the country (Hao, Zhang, & Yu, 1996; Chang & Yu, 2001; He, 2004, Lee, 1994). Journalists understand those unwritten rules very well and as a result, for example, portray even negative things in a positive light (Jernow, 1994).

In addition to the propaganda system, the Chinese government has absolute power and control over its citizens, leading to a power imbalance between the government and the public. This makes two-way symmetrical communication impossible, because communication is always one-way from the government through the media to the public, and the purpose of communication is to persuade the public to accept the Communist Party's

worldviews. Therefore, China's authoritarian and one-party system is a big obstacle to interactive communications.

Beginning in early 1990s, the government asked the press to support itself financially. The government cut the budgets of most publishers, whether of books, magazines, or newspapers, making it clear that the media have to support themselves even while they technically remain within the state system (Burgh, 2003; Chen & Lee, 1998, Sun, Chang & Yu, 2001, Zhao, 2000). Ma (2003) suggests that although the government has released media operations to the market, it is maintaining control over major political issues by retaining ownership and the right to censor. This presented publishers with a new challenge: "how to appeal to the public while avoiding political trouble." Many "evening or metropolitan newspapers that carried stories on entertainment, fashion, sports, and other popular but politically innocuous topics" were created (Perry, 2005 p. 36).

Therefore, market forces, increasing public demand for information access, and the Communist Party's promise to have a more open government have led to remarkable progress in freedom of the press in China in recent years (Chu, 1994; Chen & Lee, 1998; Chang & Yu, 2001).

The Adoption of the Internet in China

As Internet technology has spread worldwide, China has not been immune to the advantages of having a country connected to the Internet. With Internet access, scientific, financial, business, industrial, military, political and cultural information is within easy reach, and in the current Information Age, information is power. Therefore, in spite of the potential problems an Internet connection might bring to China's political and social systems, it is not

surprising that China is anxious to upgrade its infrastructure and overhaul its national economy in exchange for information.

Before 1994, the Chinese government permitted only a small group of elite people to use the Internet. Although the government loosened its control in 1994, allowing the general public to access the Internet, it placed various restrictions on both content and access (He & Zhu, 2002; Du, 1999).

In recent years, computers have become popular among middle-income families, and the trend has even extended to lower-income families. He and Zhu (2002) pointed out that one important reason is Chinese consumers are tending to “purchase products that help to demonstrate their socio-economical status and benefit the education of their children (p.127).” In addition, navigating on the Internet has become a popular activity in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, where the number of Internet users is increasing rapidly every month.

According to official statistics from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there were 111 million Internet users in China by the end of January 2006, up from only 620,000 users in October 1997 (*17th Statistical survey report on the Internet development in China*, 2006). The rapid expansion of Internet access has presented the authorities with great challenges in their attempt to censor and control the online activities of Internet users.

Some optimists believe that the Internet technology will allow users to break through traditional controls of information in China. The Internet gives the public the right and the power to publish without prior censorship, bringing the practice of free expression and free press on an unprecedented scale (e.g. Casey, 2003). The following extract from the South

China Morning Post (“Internet art of process,” 1996) captured the optimistic liberal mood in public discussions of this technology’s political significance: “The Internet and associated technology is like a snowball which is rolling and getting bigger. It gives everyone a voice, which is why it will still be going while those who seek to regulate it will have departed the scene.”

Hao, Zhang, and Yu (1996) also state that the Chinese government may have been successful in “preventing the Chinese media from publishing or broadcasting anything it considers opposing the Chinese Constitution, harming the socialist system and national security, promoting subversion, rebellion, riots, and ethnical animosity, and instigating defiance to the leadership of the Communist Party” (p 8), but now net users can easily get such material once they log onto the Internet. Therefore, unlike the traditional media, for which the government plays the role of censor and gatekeeper, the Internet provides a relatively safe forum for Chinese users to discuss politically sensitive issues and exchange information censored by the government-controlled media.

While China is eager to link computer networks to the Internet, many argued that the Chinese government has never wavered in its determination to maintain its control over information and extend its censorship policy to communication over the Internet (Hao, Zhang, & Yu, 1996; Taubman, 1998). The following appeared in the 2004 annual report of U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission to the Congress:

“Many individuals in China and in the United States believe that it [Internet] will lead to greater openness and the freer flow of information. However, the Chinese government is actively trying to control the Internet with a mixture of old tactics, such as high profile punishment for vaguely defined crimes, and newer methods, such as establishing firewalls and tracing users” (p.213).

A recent cover story in *Forbes* (Morris, 2006) reveals more details about the Internet battle between the Chinese government and dissidents. With the engineering help of Western companies, such as Cisco and Microsoft, the Chinese Communist Party uses a filtering system called Golden Shield to censor the Internet and e-mail of China's 110 million Internet users. Internet police in Beijing are overseeing web users' activities and creating lists of banned words that cause a key word search to be invalid or a site to be blocked. Meanwhile, dissidents use proxy technology and encryption to slip through the filtering system. The censorship in China is best thought of as a cat-and-mouse game.

The researcher believes that while the Internet connection is unlikely to produce fundamental changes in China's political system or media system in the near future, it does have the potential to expand the existing public sphere. As described in *New York Times* (Zeller, 2004), apart from a range of sensitive topics, China's Internet is a hothouse of content on a wide range topics and interests. The Internet does challenge the ability of the Chinese government to control information while expanding and diversifying the country's communication structures.

The popularity of BBSs and its impact in China

James, Wotring, and Forrest (1995) proposed five potential reasons why BBS technologies are so popular: (1) the BBS possesses a large audience base; (2) it is fast for both sending and retrieving messages; (3) posting messages on the BBS is very easy (it is a weak gatekeeper); (4) there are many topics (issues) about which readers can express their opinion; and (5) costs are low.

The attractiveness of BBS is especially prominent in China where the government has strong censorship on media and the public lacks a channel to freely exchange opinions. The relatively weaker gatekeeping and the interactivity permitted by the Internet make the BBS a very popular and influential platform. The following case illustrates how the BBS can expand public discourse.

In March 2003, Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old graphic designer, was arrested for failing to carry an ID card. Because he had recently moved from central China to the southern city of Guangzhou, he was considered a migrant and was therefore required by law to carry a temporary residence permit. Shortly after being sent to a local repatriation center by authorities, Sun was beaten to death. However, the day after, it was announced that he "died of heart attack." After hearing about this, some reporters conducted a secret investigation at great risk. The autopsy showed that the cause of death was massive internal injuries resulting from being beaten rather than heart attack. There was also evidence of burn injuries on his shoulders and knees. Sun's story went unreported in the Chinese media for nearly a month. On April 25, 2003, The Southern Metropolitan Daily finally broke the silence, publishing an article titled "The Death of Detainee Sun." For the first time, it revealed the truth about the tragedy. The same day, the article was posted on many popular news websites. Immediately, the coverage aroused widespread indignation among BBS users, and the number of posts rose astonishingly, rivaling the number of public responses over SARS. The tremendous response to Sun Zhigang's case in the cyber world forced the government to investigate the truth and punish the criminals. Meanwhile, many people criticized the distorted "detention-and-repatriation" system and re-examined the basis for it. In an executive meeting of the State Council presided over by Premier Wen Jiabao on June 28, 2003, a protocol regarding the

“Salvation of urban wanderers and beggars without livelihood ” was passed, thus abolishing the previous regulation promulgated by the State Council in May 1982.

Although TV and newspapers report this type of news occasionally, these topics usually disappear within a few days. The BBS, on the other hand, overcoming geographic boundaries, can create discussions over controversial issues that continue over a long period, thus having a much larger audience base.

Newsworthiness

Newsworthiness has been seen as one of the most indefinable concepts in mass communication research. Significant events happen daily around the world, but only some of them are reported in the news media (Shoemaker, Danielian & Brendlinger, 1991). Stempel (1985) shows that although the individual stories published in newspapers differ, there is considerable similarity in the kinds of topics that are appropriate or newsworthy. Without a doubt, newsworthiness is an important criterion for publication. But what is meant when one says an event or person is newsworthy?

Newsworthiness has been defined pragmatically as whatever the editor decides is news (Hulteng & Nelson, 1971). Philosophically, a newsworthy event is one that affects or changes social, economic, political, physical, or other relationships (Harriss, Leiter, & Johnson, 1985).

Most textbooks take a hands-on approach when defining newsworthiness. Generally they provide a list of generally accepted newsworthiness indicators along with a few examples. Those indicators of newsworthiness may include timeliness, proximity,

importance, impact or consequence, interest, conflict or controversy, sensationalism, prominence, and novelty, oddity, or the unusual (Baskette, Sissors & Brooks, 1986; Dennis & Ismach, 1981). These indicators are included with little variation in most journalism textbooks. Because it has proven very difficult to operationalize more than a few news values, most studies test only one or two of them (Westerstahl & Johansson, 1994).

Deviance and Social Significance

Shoemaker and her colleagues have done extensive analysis of newsworthiness (Eichholz, 2003; Lee, 2003). After critically reviewing previous works, Shoemaker, Chang & Brendlinger (1987), Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger (1991) and Shoemaker (1996) provided a theoretical newsworthiness model with two main constructs—deviance and social significance—by tying those newsworthiness indicators together into a meaningful way. Believing that human beings’ “desire to receive and transmit information is both biologically and culturally derived” (p.33), Shoemaker (1996) concluded that “an interest in news is probably the result of an interaction between these two pure models, with humans both innately interested in deviant events and socialized to attend to events that have some significance to their particular culture and society” (p. 44).

Generally, a news item can be both deviant and socially significant, thus combining characteristics of both constructs (Eichholz, 2003). Of the usual indicators of newsworthiness, conflict or controversy, sensationalism, prominence, and novelty, oddity, or the unusual are most likely to be related to deviance and discussed as a deviance dimension of newsworthiness. Importance, impact or consequence and interest are indicators that are more

related to social significance and form a social significance dimension. Timeliness and proximity are usually discussed as contingent conditions (Shoemaker, Chang & Brendlinger, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996). This two-main-construct-based model predicts that events of high deviance and high social significance should receive the most prominent coverage (Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Eichholz, 2003).

The construct deviance refers to news items that are unusual, different, and odd, or events or persons who are not considered normal by a society's generally accepted values and norms. This definition includes positive deviance (good news) and negative deviance (bad news). Three components constitute this deviance construct: they are statistical deviance, potential for social change deviance, and normative deviance (Shoemaker, 1996; Shoemaker, Chang, & Brendlinger, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Lee, 2003; Eichholz, 2003).

Statistical deviance refers to the likelihood of a news event actually happening; statistically speaking, it is the distance from the mean. The more unlikely an event is to happen, the more statistically deviant it is. Statistical deviance is the result of things that are unusual (either good or bad), and causes them to be considered more newsworthy than commonplace events. The statistically deviant event is more likely to be covered, but the assessment of whether something is statistically deviant may change. For example, a heart bypass operation was deviant 20 years ago, but today it won't be seen as deviant any more.

Potential for social change deviance refers to an event's potential to threaten or change the status quo in a city, region, country or the international system. It is based on the

assumption that the news media act as agents of social control that help to maintain social order by reporting deviant news that has the potential to change the status quo.

Normative deviance refers to a behavior, attitude, or opinion that violates or breaks a social collective's existing norms, rules, or laws (Shoemaker, 1984). Gans (1979) described journalists as moral guardians who reinforce and legitimize "national and societal values by publicizing and helping to punish those who deviate from the values" (p. 293). Norm-breaking stories can also include those that are far less serious.

As suggested by Shoemaker & Reese (1996), one way the media tell us what is normal is by showing us what is deviant. However, deviance is not viewed as an unchanging condition but is continually being defined and renegotiated. "The media are continually coping with news ideas, reaffirming social norms, and redrawing or defining boundaries" (p. 46). In addition, in different countries or areas, there may be discrepancies about what is deemed to be deviant.

The second construct is social significance. Social significance refers to whether a news item deals with an event, institution, or person who is considered important in or has an impact on a certain social collective. Rather than being unusual, these news items have a deeper meaning and relevance for the society they pertain to. In other words, while deviance is based on general human biology, social significance is embedded in specific cultures. Social significance has three components—economic significance, political significance, and cultural significance (Shoemaker, Danlielien, & Brendlinger, 1991; Eichholz, 2003; Lee, 2003).

Political significance is defined as the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on the relationship between people and government or between governments, including the judicial, legislative, and executive subsystems.

Economic significance of a news item refers to the extent to which the content of the news item has potential or actual impact on the exchange of goods and services, including the monetary system, business, tariffs, labor, transportation, job markets, resources, and infrastructure.

Cultural significance is defined as the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on a social system's traditions, institutions, and norms, such as religion, ethnicity, arts, or entertainment.

Shoemaker and her colleagues consistently found deviance and social significance to be linked with higher amounts of news coverage. Various empirical studies have examined the usefulness of deviance and social significance as related to newsworthiness in recent years (Weimann & Brosius, 1991; David 1996; Breen, 1997; Eichholz, 2003, Lee, 2003).

The identification of something as news is common across human beings, not just journalists (Shoemaker, 1996). Especially, as stated by Brooks, Kennedy, Moen & Ranly (1980), a basic goal of all journalists is to satisfy the needs and wants of their audiences and to explore what they think is important and interesting. Though there is no single, universally accepted definition of news, and people's recognition of news values change over time, the researcher suggests that the general news values used by journalists and editors for selecting and publishing could also stimulate interactivity on the reader's side.

Triggering Events

A few longitudinal studies, such as Rogers, Dearing & Chang (1991) and Abbott, Lucht, Jensen , & Jordan (2001) have documented “triggering events” leading to multiple peaks in coverage over time. However, as stated by Abbott et al. (2001), it is difficult to predict what will trigger coverage and what will not. What is sure is that the cycles of media coverage will be uneven due to the fact that some events trigger much attention.

In their 1991 study, Rogers, Dearing and Chang documented and analyzed the issue of AIDS in the United States during the 1980s. They were concerned with how an issue initially climbs the media agenda and how an issue may or may not persist for a lengthy time period. Their study of the AIDS issue in the 1980s shows that the interaction among agendas (mass media agenda, scientific agenda, polling agenda, public agenda, and the policy agenda) is an important reason for the continued coverage of the issue in mass media. A second factor maintaining coverage of AIDS over time is that new information about AIDS becomes available regularly and is interpreted in new ways. Different triggering events happened at different times. As one AIDS sub-issue faded on the agenda, another AIDS sub- issue rose to take its place. The authors agreed that while actual incidence of HIV/AIDS increased over the period, media coverage was episodic, consisting of a number of “triggering” events that each led to a spike in coverage. For example, after reports based on a medical journal suggested that “routine household contact” might spread AIDS, there was a spike in coverage and reader concern. The next spike occurred when actor Rock Hudson died of AIDS in mid-1985.

Similarly, Abbott et al. (2001) studied how triggering events affect mass media coverage and source use concerning genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Britain and the United States. They examined the dynamics in media coverage of risk topics that occur within media cycles and synthesized three conceptual models that shed light on what leads to those peaks in media coverage. There are several findings about triggering events from their study: (1) very different triggers were operating at different times in the two countries; (2) at times of triggering events, the number of sources quoted in media coverage increase; (3) the triggering events seemed to narrow coverage by focusing on some aspect of the topic.

These two studies suggest that there is no particular kind of event that definitely has a triggering effect. That means a triggering event likely involves situational factors. However, when triggering events occur, they result in a tremendous increase in media coverage and public response in a relatively short time.

As suggested by the public arena perspective, many social problems and their proponents compete with other problems to gain access to very limited broadcast time and print space (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991). If mass media are constantly publishing thousands of news articles daily, and if competition among issues is so intense, then how can some news stories attract so much attention and cause many responses from readers in a very short time, and some of them even cause readers to keep responding to them for weeks? There might be something about those events that trigger the public response, making those triggering events different from others.

Newsworthiness could be one explanation for triggering: If readers respond to news stories according to their news value, and if a news story has very high news value, it may trigger a huge public response. However, it is also possible that there are some factors other

than newsworthiness that trigger the responses. Newsworthiness and the other factors may be competing or complementary theories in explaining how some news stories reach such a high level of reader response.

As indicated in the introduction, this study is to try to explain patterns of interactivity between readers and mass media in BBS. Therefore, the dependant variable is the level of audience interactivity via BBS in response to news items. This will be measured by the number of comments that each news item gets. Independent variables are measures of newsworthiness that comprise two dimensions—deviance (statistical deviance, social change deviance, and normative deviance) and social significance (political significance, economic significance, and cultural significance)—six variables in total.

The investigation of triggering in the study is somewhat exploratory. It focuses on qualitative analysis of the articles that resulted in an unusually large audience response in BBS. The qualitative analysis will also seek to identify common elements in triggering stories that might lead to a high level of audience interactivity. In this study, a triggering event is defined as one that exceeds a certain number of responses over a given period of time.

HYPOTHESES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: To what extent has China's BBS increased levels of audience interactivity by people getting their news from the system?

RQ 2: Do traditional news values that journalists use also account for high levels of audience interactivity?

Six hypotheses are constructed under this research question:

Hypotheses 1-3: deviance related hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: the higher the level of statistical deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

Hypothesis 2: the higher the level of social change deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

Hypothesis 3: the higher the level of normative deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

Hypotheses 4-6: social significance related hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: the higher the level of political significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets.

Hypothesis 5: the higher the level of economic significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets.

Hypothesis 6: the higher the level of cultural significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets.

RQ3: What types of news trigger an extremely high response and why?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to study the interactivity of electronic BBS of China where a lot of different levels of reader response exist. The three research goals were to: (1) examine the extent to which China's BBS has increased audience interactivity by those getting their news from the system; (2) examine the extent to which newsworthiness criteria often used by journalists for publishing also might be used by readers for responding; (3) examine whether there are factors other than newsworthiness involved in a news event leading to high level of reader response.

The first research goal was measured by randomly selecting a day and adding up all BBS postings to get a general idea of how many people are using the bulletin board system to respond to news in a typical day. The statistics can provide clues of whether the BBS has increased reader interactivity, compared to the number of letters sent to editors in traditional newspapers. Because there is no global number of postings available from BBS web sites, the top 100 news items were picked and total posting numbers were calculated.

To address the second research goal, the researcher conducted a quantitative content analysis. One hundred and twenty eight news items were selected—half from the top 10 BBS postings in response to stories, and the other half from a sampling of remaining items. News values were evaluated to see if top-ten BBS items scored higher in newsworthiness than other items. To address the third research goal, a special qualitative analysis was undertaken of stories that triggered very high levels of audience response.

Selection of Source

The major source for this study was SINA.com. As the most recognized leading online media company in China, SINA has an established network of localized Web sites that target China and overseas Chinese communities. By cooperating with thousands of news media, SINA.com offers a full range of comprehensive and timely news coverage including, but not limited to, national news, international news, sports, entertainment, business, science and technology, culture and education, and society. It is known in the industry and among netizens for its quick and comprehensive coverage of domestic and overseas events. SINA has attracted millions of registered users to communicate with one another or with groups online.

Quantitative Content Analysis

The unit of analysis for the quantitative content analysis is a single news item. Data were collected from the SINA's news sites and its attached BBS site (<http://news.sina.com.cn>). SINA.com has a web page (<http://news.sina.com.cn/comment.html>) providing rankings for news reports having the highest number of reader responses. The ranking records the top ten news items of each major category (domestic news, world news, sports, science & technology, cultural & education, business, entertainment, and society) and updates every hour. The number of comments that each news item receives is also listed in the ranking, which is a cumulative number over five days. To be ranked, it is not necessary that a news report was published within the five-day period; as long as it maintains a high reader response in the latest five days, it is eligible to appear in the ranking. Therefore, a news story could appear once in the

ranking and then drop from the list when readers lose their interest, only to reappear later when it attracts the public's attention again. An ongoing event with tremendous influence may stay in the ranking for weeks, such as the news of the tsunami hitting Asian countries in late December 2004.

In order to reduce sampling error and increase the precision and reliability of the study, a reasonable sample size is required. As Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993) demonstrated in their study, a composite sampling technique has many advantages, superior to both a random sample and a consecutive day sample when dealing with newspaper content. Therefore, the data collection for this study was conducted over seven weeks to make a composite week. First, the researcher randomly selected a day: Tuesday, February 8, 2005, and then selected a Wednesday, a Thursday, a Friday, a Saturday, a Sunday and a Monday in the following weeks.

- Tuesday, February 8, 2005
- Wednesday, February 16, 2005
- Thursday, February 24, 2005
- Friday, March 4, 2005
- Saturday, March 12, 2005
- Sunday, March 20, 2005
- Monday, March 28, 2005

In each designated data-collecting day, the researcher gathered the ten top news stories from each of the eight major categories (domestic news, world news, sports, science & technology, culture & education, business, entertainment, society) according to the ranking of that day. Then, by breaking the category boundary, the research re-ranked those news articles and selected the overall top ten and bottom ten news stories from the 80 top articles.

Those 20 news stories were used for coding and studying the relationship between the newsworthiness of a news event and its number of reader responses. The reason for choosing this way of sampling is to maximize the effect of comparison and reach the research goal with limited time and human resources. Based on observations from the pretest, the researcher found that even among the top news the average number of responses for the top ten is much higher than the average number for the bottom even among those top stories. A gap exists, and it is big enough to study whether the deviance and social significance a news event possesses affects the number of responses it receives. Therefore, the total number of news items for this study was obtained using the following formula: News items = 20 pieces X 7 days = 140. However, because three news stories stayed in the ranking for weeks and they were removed for the special qualitative analysis, the actual number of articles coded for quantitative content analysis was 128. The 128 news items were separated into the two groups, the top group and the bottom group. Since all repeated stories were in the top group and removed from this content analysis, there are 70 news items in the bottom group and 58 news items in the top group.

The dependant variable for this study is the level of audience interactivity via BBS in response to news items. This was measured by the number of comments that each news item gets.

The independent variables are measures of newsworthiness. Newsworthiness comprises two dimensions—deviance (statistical deviance, social change deviance, and normative deviance) and social significance (political significance, economic significance, and cultural significance)—six variables in total. Each variable was coded independently

using the following operational definitions adapted from previous studies (e.g. Shoemaker, Chang & Brendlinger, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger 1991; Eichholz, 2003).

Statistical deviance is defined as the likelihood of a news event actually happening; statistically speaking, the difference from the mean. It was coded by using a four point scale with the following categories: (1) common information that can be found frequently; (2) somewhat unusual information, which can be found occasionally; (3) unusual information that can rarely be found; (4) information is extremely unusual and totally unexpected.

Potential for social change deviance refers to an event's potential to threaten or change the status quo in a city, region, country or the international system. It was coded: (1) the information provided is not at all threatening to the status quo; (2) the information provided represents a minimal threat to the status quo; (3) the information provided represents a moderate threat to the status quo; (4) the information provided represents a major threat to the status quo.

Normative deviance is defined as a behavior, attitude, or opinion that violates or breaks a social collective's existing norms, rules, or laws. It was coded: (1) the information provided does not violate any norms or laws; (2) the information provided represents a minimal violation of one or more norms or laws; (3) the information provided represents a moderate violation of one or more norms or laws; (4) the information provided represents a major violation of one or more norms or laws.

Political significance is defined as the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on the relationship between people and government or between governments, including the judicial, legislative, and executive subsystems. It was coded: (1) the information provided is not at all politically significant; (2) the information provided is of

minimal political significance; (3) the information provided is of moderate political significance; (4) the information provided is of major political significance.

Economic significance of a news item refers to the extent to which the content of the news item has potential or actual impact on the exchange of goods and services, including the monetary system, business, tariffs, labor, transportation, job markets, resources, and infrastructure. It was coded: (1) the information provided is not at all economically significant; (2) the information provided is of minimal economic significance; (3) the information provided is of moderate economic significance; (4) the information provided is of major economic significance.

Cultural significance is defined as the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on a social system's traditions, institutions, and norms, such as religion, ethnicity, or the arts. It was coded: (1) the information provided is not at all culturally significant; (2) the information provided is of minimal cultural significance; (3) the information provided is of moderate cultural significance; (4) the information provided is of major cultural significance.

Intercoder reliability for these six independent variables was assessed by using Scott's Pi statistics (Scott, 1955) among the ratings of three coders. Twenty percent of total news stories were accessed for intercoder reliability. Table 1 lists the respective intercoder reliability score for independent variables. The average Scott Pi for the six variables was .84. The measure of dependent variable is the number of comments that each news item got provided by the website, and there is no disagreement about it.

To test the six hypotheses, one way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was conducted to see whether the distribution in the top group is significantly different from the distribution in

the bottom group. Sub-analyses were also conducted to point out what exactly those differences are.

Table 1. Inter-coder Reliability for Independent Variables

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Inter-coder Reliability</u>
Statistical deviance	.75
Social change deviance	.90
Normative deviance	.85
Political significance	.90
Economical significance	.90
<u>Cultural significance</u>	.75
<u>Average</u>	<u>.84</u>

Special Qualitative Triggering Analysis

Triggering events, defined as those that exceed a certain number of responses over a given period of time, are selected for qualitative study. Several repeated stories that have appeared in the ranking at different times are also considered triggering events both because of higher level and longer lasting reader responses. To be specific, the researcher picked the upper 10% of the 128 news items by ranking the number of comments that they got in five days and the three repeated stories. Therefore, a total of 13 news items were selected for the qualitative triggering analysis.

Each of these led to a very high level of responses. An analysis was conducted of a sampling of actual BBS messages posted pertaining to each selected news story. Since the website keeps the reader comments in the form of 20 postings per web page, the researcher

used a page as the unit for collecting comments. At first, 10 pages including the first page and the last page (a total of 200 postings) were randomly selected across the time. Because the 13 triggering events have a range of 162 pages (3,240 postings) to 1,735 pages of comments, the skip interval for selecting varied according to the total number of pages. If there were some important comments that stimulated other people's responses, the researcher looked back and selected more. If later postings were similar to former ones, and the 200 comments were enough to shed light on the reason for people's interests, the researcher stopped after analysis of the 200. Since repeated stories occur over a longer period, 800 comments for each news story were selected across time.

Each selected comment was read and categorized as either "responding to news story" or "responding to someone else's comments." By reading all selected comments of a news item, the researcher classified major types of comments and gave possible explanations for why a particular news event triggered extremely high reader response.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this section, the findings are reported in the order of the three research questions. The second research question, which was answered by quantitative content analysis, includes six hypotheses. The third research question, answered by a qualitative triggering analysis, examines each of the 13 selected stories as case studies.

RQ1: To what extent has China's BBS increased levels of audience interactivity by people getting their news from the system?

The data from a randomly selected day, Nov.16, 2005, reveal a total of 30,263 responses for the top hundred news items (selected from eight major categories), an average of 303 comments each. It is remarkable that more than 30,000 responses were received in just 24 hours. Moreover, this number is not the whole number of comments posted on Sina's news BBS. Thousands of news stories are published on the web each day. The researcher only picked the top hundred news items and their corresponding posting numbers, using this number to give an indication of how many people are using the BBS and how frequently the interactivity occurs in the BBS on a typical day.

Historically, the letters column has provided an outlet for readers to interact with media content and the issues of the day; it has been an important public forum for the community. However, relatively few people take the time and trouble to write letters, and because of the limited print space, only a small number of the letters received are published.

The huge number of comments in response to news posted on BBS sites is substantially larger than any numbers previously reported for newspaper or any other traditional mass media. Thus, the answer to the first question seems clear. The BBS has greatly increased the amount of reader interactivity.

RQ2: Do traditional news values that journalists use also account for high levels of audience interactivity?

In this part, the findings consist of descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables and results of hypotheses testing.

Descriptive Findings

The content analysis was based on a sample of 128 news items that were coded and analyzed. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, the number of comments in five days, as well as the independent variables including statistical deviance, social change deviance, normative deviance, political significance, economic significance, and cultural significance. Means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums are provided for each variable.

The number of comments in response to the 128 news items ranged from 12 to 8,100, with an average of 1,138. The average statistical deviance score was 1.59, meaning that it was somewhere between “common information” and “somewhat unusual information.” The average social change deviance (1.18) and normative deviance (1.12) scores were somewhat lower and thus less deviant. The average social significance scores ranged from 1.23

(economic significance) to 1.52 (cultural significance), with political significance (1.36) scoring in between.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables for all cases, N=128.

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Dependent Variable				
Number of comments (5 days)	1138.46	1498.29	12	8100
Independent Variable				
Statistical deviance*	1.59	.83	1	4
Social change deviance**	1.18	.48	1	3
Normative deviance***	1.12	.48	1	4
Political significance****	1.36	.78	1	4
Economic significance****	1.23	.58	1	4
Cultural significance****	1.52	.83	1	4

Note. Repeated stories were not included in the one-way ANOVA test.

*News stories were coded: 1= common information, 2 = somewhat unusual information, 3 = unusual information, 4 = extremely unusual information.

** News stories were coded: 1= not at all threatening to status quo, 2 = minimal threat to status quo, 3 = moderate threat to status quo, 4 = major threat to status quo.

*** News stories were coded: 1= no violation of norms/laws, 2 = minimal violation of norms/laws, 3 = moderate violation of norms/laws, 4 = major violation of norms/laws.

**** News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Table 3 and Table 4 show means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums of variables for the top and bottom groups respectively. In the top group, the number of comments for the 58 news items ranged from 838 to 8100, with an average of 2,428. The average statistical deviance score for the top group reached 2.01, followed by social change deviance (1.29) and normative deviance (1.22). The average cultural significance score (1.95) was the highest, followed by political significance (1.74) and economic significance (1.34).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables for the top group, N=58

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Dependent Variable				
Number of comments (5 days)	2427.59	1381.13	838	8100
Independent Variable				
Statistical deviance*	2.01	.98	1	4
Social change deviance**	1.29	.62	1	3
Normative deviance***	1.22	.68	1	4
Political significance****	1.74	1.02	1	4
Economic significance****	1.34	.76	1	4
Cultural significance****	1.95	1.02	1	4

*News stories were coded: 1= common information, 2 = somewhat unusual information, 3 = unusual information, 4 = extremely unusual information.

** News stories were coded: 1= not at all threatening to status quo, 2 = minimal threat to status quo, 3 = moderate threat to status quo, 4 = major threat to status quo.

*** News stories were coded: 1= no violation of norms/laws, 2 = minimal violation of norms/laws, 3 = moderate violation of norms/laws, 4 = major violation of norms/laws.

**** News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables for the bottom group, N=70.

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Dependent Variable				
Number of comments (5 days)	70.33	41.87	12	228
Independent Variable				
Statistical deviance*	1.24	.43	1	2
Social change deviance**	1.09	.28	1	2
Normative deviance***	1.03	.17	1	2
Political significance****	1.04	.20	1	2
Economic significance****	1.14	.35	1	2
Cultural significance****	1.16	.37	1	2

*News stories were coded: 1= common information, 2 = somewhat unusual information, 3 = unusual information, 4 = extremely unusual information.

** News stories were coded: 1= not at all threatening to status quo, 2 = minimal threat to status quo, 3 = moderate threat to status quo, 4 = major threat to status quo.

*** News stories were coded: 1= no violation of norms/laws, 2 = minimal violation of norms/laws, 3 = moderate violation of norms/laws, 4 = major violation of norms/laws.

**** News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Table 5. One-way Analysis of variance for deviance and social significance by groups, means and standard deviation

Variables	Group		F	df	Significance (one tail)
	Top (n=58)	Bottom (n=70)			
Number of comments (5 days)	2427.59 (1381.13)	70.32 (41.87)	204.02	1	.000
Deviance					
Statistical deviance*	2.02 (.98)	1.24 (.43)	35.32	1	.000
Social change deviance**	1.29 (.62)	1.09 (.28)	6.25	1	.007
Normative deviance***	1.22 (.68)	1.03 (.17)	5.45	1	.011
Social Significance					
Political significance****	1.74 (1.04)	1.01 (.20)	31.46	1	.000
Economic significance****	1.34 (.76)	1.14 (.35)	3.81	1	.026
Cultural significance****	1.95 (1.02)	1.16 (.37)	36.72	1	.000

*News stories were coded: 1= common information, 2 = somewhat unusual information, 3 = unusual information, 4 = extremely unusual information.

** News stories were coded: 1= not at all threatening to status quo, 2 = minimal threat to status quo, 3 = moderate threat to status quo, 4 = major threat to status quo.

*** News stories were coded: 1= no violation of norms/laws, 2 = minimal violation of norms/laws, 3 = moderate violation of norms/laws, 4 = major violation of norms/laws.

**** News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

As Table 4 shows, the number of comments for the 70 news items in the bottom group ranged from 12 to 228, with an average of 70, which is much lower than the average of 2,428 for the top group. The average deviance scores of the bottom group were also lower than the respective scores of the top group, with 1.24 for statistical deviance, 1.09 for social change deviance, and 1.03 for normative deviance. Thus, most of the news items fell in the category of “common information.” Similarly, the average social significance scores of the bottom group were also much lower than the respective top group scores, showing very little social significance. The average scores were 1.04 for political significance, 1.14 for economic significance and 1.16 for cultural significance.

Hypotheses Testing

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to test the six hypotheses for newsworthiness. As Table 5 shows, the difference in terms of number of comments between the top ten group and the bottom ten was significant, achieving the .001 significance level ($F=204.02$).

Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of statistical deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

The statistical deviance score shown in table 5 was significantly different between the two groups ($P<.001$, $F=35.32$) with a mean score of 2.02 for top group and 1.24 for bottom group. As shown in the statistical deviance measure in Table 6, 75.5% of news items in the bottom group were coded as common information (score=1), and all the others (24.3%) were coded as somewhat unusual information (score=2). No news items had a score of 3 or 4. In

contrast, 27.6% of the news items in the top group had a statistical deviance score of 3 (unusual information), and 6.9 % had a score of 4 (extremely unusual information).

The one-way ANOVA results strongly support the relevance of statistical deviance in explaining the readers' responses and confirm that readers are more likely to respond to unusual news stories than to stories within the realm of the expected.

Table 6. Distribution of Statistical Deviance score in two groups

Score *	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	23	39.7%	53	75.7%
2	15	25.9%	17	24.3%
3	16	27.6%	0	0
4	4	6.9%	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

*News stories were coded: 1= common information, 2 = somewhat unusual information, 3 = unusual information, 4 = extremely unusual information.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the level of social change deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

The difference in social change deviance between the two groups was also statistically significant ($p < .01$). The top group has a mean score of 1.29 and the bottom group has a mean score of 1.09. As Table 7 shows, most news items in the bottom group

were not at all threatening to the status quo: 91.4% of news in this group had a social change deviance score of 1, and all others (8.6%) were coded as minimally threatening to the status quo (score=2). No news items had a score of 3 or 4. There also were no news items in the top group that had a score of 4 (a major threat to the status quo), but 8.6 % of them were coded as moderately threatening to the status quo (score=3), and 12.1% were at least minimally threatening.

The difference between the two groups in social change deviance ($F= 6.25$) was significant at the .01 level, and supports Hypothesis 2 that news items with higher social change deviance receive more responses.

Table 7. Distribution of Social Change Deviance score in two groups

Score*	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	46	79.3%	64	91.4%
2	7	12.1%	6	8.6%
3	5	8.6%	0	0
4	0	0	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

*News stories were coded: 1= not at all threatening to status quo, 2 = minimal threat to status quo, 3 = moderate threat to status quo, 4 = major threat to status quo.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the level of normative deviance in the news event, the more response the news story gets.

As shown in Table 5, the difference in normative deviance measure was statistically significantly at the .05 level ($p=.011$). The top group had a mean score of 1.22 and the bottom group had a mean score of 1.03. As Table 8 shows, most news items in the bottom group showed no violations of norms/laws; 97.1% of them had a normative deviance score of 1. Only 2.9%, were coded as minimal violations of norms/laws (score=2). No news items had a score of 3 or 4. For the top group, 3.4% of news items were coded as moderate violations of norms/laws (score=3), and 3.4 % were coded as major violation of norms/ laws (score=4).

The one-way ANOVA result for normative deviance ($F= 5.45$) was significant at the .05 level, supporting the hypothesis that news items with higher normative deviance get more responses.

Table 8. Distribution of Normative Deviance score in two groups

Score *	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	51	87.9%	68	97.1%
2	3	5.2%	2	2.9%
3	2	3.4%	0	0
4	2	3.4%	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

* News stories were coded: 1= no violation of norms/laws, 2 = minimal violation of norms/laws, 3 = moderate violation of norms/laws, 4 = major violation of norms/laws.

Hypothesis 4: The higher the level of political significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets

The one-way ANOVA test shown in table 5 for political significance showed the two groups were significantly different ($P < .001$, $F = 31.46$), with a mean score of 1.74 for the top group and 1.01 for the bottom group. As Table 9 reveals, 95.7% of news items in the bottom group were not politically significant at all (score=1), and the remaining 4.3% were coded as having minimal significance (score=2). No news items were coded as having moderate or major political significance (score of 3 or 4). However, 15.5% of news items in the top group scored as having moderate political significance (score=3) and 8.6 % of news as having major political significance (score=4). This hypothesis was firmly supported by the one-way ANOVA result.

Table 9. Distribution of Political Significance score in two groups

Score*	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	34	58.6%	67	95.7%
2	10	17.2%	3	4.3%
3	9	15.5%	0	0
4	5	8.6%	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

* News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Hypothesis 5: The higher the level of economic significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets.

As shown in Table 5, the difference in economic significance between the two groups was statistically significant at the .05 level. The top group had a mean score of 1.34 and the bottom group had a mean score of 1.14. As Table 10 shows, 85.7% of news items in the bottom group showed no economic significance, and all the others (14.3%) were coded as minimal economic significance(score=2). No news items had a score of 3 or 4. For the top group, 12.1 % of news items were coded as moderate economic significance (score=3), and 1.7 % were coded as major economic significance (score=4).

The one-way ANOVA result for economic significance ($F= 3.81$) was significant at the .05 level, supporting the hypothesis that news items with higher economic significance get more responses.

Table 10. Distribution of Economical Significance score in two groups

Score *	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	47	81%	60	85.7%
2	3	5.2%	10	14.3%
3	7	12.1%	0	0
4	1	1.7%	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

* News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Hypothesis 6: The higher the level of cultural significance in a news event, the greater the response the news story gets.

The cultural significance scores were significantly different between the two groups ($P<.001$, $F=36.72$), with a mean score of 1.95 for the top group and 1.16 for the bottom group. Table 11 shows 84.3% of news items in the bottom group were not culturally significant at all (score=1), and the remaining 15.7% had minimal significance (score=2). No news items were coded as having moderate or major cultural significance (score of 3 or 4). By contrast, 43.1% of news items in the top group had moderate cultural significance (score=3) and 1.7 % had major cultural significance (score=4).

Therefore, the one-way ANOVA results and findings strongly support Hypothesis 6 that news items with higher cultural significance get more readers' responses.

Table 11. Distribution of Cultural Significance score in two groups

Score *	<u>Top Group</u>		<u>Bottom Group</u>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	30	57.1%	59	84.3%
2	2	3.4%	11	15.7%
3	25	43.1%	0	0
4	1	1.7%	0	0
Total	58	100%	70	100%

* News stories were coded: 1= not at all significant, 2 = minimal significance, 3 = moderate significance, 4 = major significance

Table 12 revealed additional interesting insights. The researcher recoded the 128 news items by dichotomizing each measure's scale into high (2, 3 and 4 ratings) and low (1 rating) on the basis of their original four point scale coding. Having any a deviance or social significance score more than or equaling to 2 (re-coded as high) means that the news item has some newsworthiness for that particular measure.

As Table 12 shows, even in the top group no news item had all six types of newsworthiness. In the top group, only one had five types of newsworthiness. The most frequent category is two types of newsworthiness, which accounts for 38%, followed by news items having one type of newsworthiness, accounting for 34%. Nonetheless, all news items in the top group have at least one type of newsworthiness. In contrast, in the bottom group, 41.4% of news items did not reach the "2" coding threshold, and 50% of news items have only one type of newsworthiness. These two portions account for a total of 91.4% of the news in the group.

Table 13 further reveals that it is not necessary for a news story to have several types of newsworthiness to receive much response. Even only one type of newsworthiness with a very high score (score = 3 or 4) in a news story can stimulate a huge response. The mean number of comments for 20 news stories with one type of newsworthiness in the top group is 2370.85, very close to the mean number of comments for the entire top group, 2427.59. For example, 16 stories were only high in cultural significance (score = 3 or 4), but they had a mean of 2,355 for the number of comments.

Meanwhile, Table 14 also shows a strong positive correlation between the number of comments and the number of types of newsworthiness for the 128 news stories. Therefore,

generally speaking, if a news story has more than one type of newsworthiness, it may have a better opportunity of receiving more responses.

Table 12 The frequency of the number of different types of newsworthiness that a news item has in two groups

Group	<u>Number of newsworthiness types of a news story</u>							Total
	0*	1*	2*	3*	4*	5*	6*	
Top	0	20	22	12	3	1	0	58
	(0)	(34%)	(38%)	(21%)	(5%)	(2%)	(0)	
Bottom	29	35	4	2	0	0	0	70
	(41.4%)	(50%)	(5.7%)	(2.9%)	(0)	(0)	(0)	

Note: news were recoded according to their six deviance and social significance scores. Having a score equal to or more than 2 in one of the six measures were treated as somewhat newsworthy in that type of newsworthiness.

0*: among 6 independent variables, there was no one coded equal to or more than 2 (all were coded as 1)

1*: One type of newsworthiness. Among 6 independent variables, 1 variable was coded equal to or more than 2.

2*: Two types of newsworthiness. Among 6 independent variables, 2 variables were coded equal to or more than 2

3*: Three types of newsworthiness. Among 6 independent variables, 3 variables were coded equal to or more than 2.

4*: Four types of newsworthiness. Among 6 independent variables, 4 variables were coded equal to or more than 2.

5*: Five types of newsworthiness. Among 6 independent variables, 5 variables were coded equal to or more than 2.

6*: Six types of newsworthiness. All 6 variables were coded equal to or more than 2.

Table 13. Statistics of the dependent variables for stories that have only one type of newsworthiness but with a very high score (score=3or4)

	<u>No. of cases</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>Min.</u>	<u>Max.</u>
The Top Group	58	2427.59	1381.13	838	8100
1 type of Newsworthiness	20	2370.85	940.83	912	4760
<i>Statistical Deviance</i>	1	1,120	--	1,120	1,120
<i>Social Change Deviance</i>	0	--	--	--	--
<i>Normative Deviance</i>	0	--	--	--	--
<i>Political Significance</i>	1	3,365	--	3,365	3,365
<i>Economic Significance</i>	2	2,623	742.64	2,098	3,148
<i>Cultural Significance</i>	16	2,355	951.59	912	4,760

Table 14. Pearson Correlation of Number of Comments and Number of Types of Newsworthiness for a news story, N=128

	<u>Person Correlation</u>		<u>Significance</u>
	<u>No. of types</u>	<u>No. of comments</u>	
No. of types	--	.495	.000
No. of comments	.495	--	.000

In summary, one-way ANOVA results supported all the six hypotheses, and three of them achieved a .001 significance level. The most pronounced difference between groups was found in the cultural significance measure, followed by the statistical deviance measure. It appears that the differences in social change deviance, normative deviance, and economic significance between groups are smaller than the former two measures. Interestingly, all news items in the bottom group only have scores of one or two across six measures--none of them had a moderate (score=3) or major (score=4) deviance or social significance score. Generally, a news story with more types of newsworthiness may get more responses; however, a very high newsworthiness alone is enough to receive a huge response.

Overall, the results confirm the positive relationship between the newsworthiness of news items and readers' responses, suggesting that stories rating high in newsworthiness criteria lead to high levels of response by readers and that the public is more likely to respond to news items that have traditional news values used by journalists.

RQ3: What types of news trigger extremely high response?

Thirteen news stories were selected for qualitative analysis to examine why they triggered such a large response from readers. Table 15 summarizes data for each triggering event, the number of comments it received and associated newsworthiness. These 13 cases were selected because their "within-five-day" comment numbers were the largest across the days selected. However, it doesn't mean that they were all published within the five days when data was collected. Some of them lasted longer, and three of them even appeared on more than one collection day. Once a news story was selected for triggering analysis, the

researcher looked at its total number of comments and examined comments from the very beginning. Therefore, all the numbers in Table 15 are the total number of comments in the duration-- from the publishing date to the data collection date.

As Table 15 shows, each news story has at least one type of newsworthiness which scored equal to or greater than three. The first news story, for example, is unusual information (Score=3) and has major political significance (Score=4). News story No. 7 is prominent in four types of newsworthiness, while news story No. 3 is prominent in only one type of newsworthiness. The certain commonality is that these triggering stories are all salient in terms of newsworthiness, either in deviance or social significance, or both.

Table 16 shows the number of comments analyzed for each triggering story and the proportion of the type of people's response: to the news content itself or to other people's comments. From the researcher's observation, there was no clear pattern of people's responses in the 13 triggering stories. The majority of the stories (9 of 13) had a ratio of nearly half and half. Sometimes responses to news content were a little bit higher; other times responses to others' comments were a bit higher. However, the differences are not pronounced and might be affected by the way the sampling of comments was taken. The only possible clue the researcher acquired is that when a triggering story is less controversial people tend to express their opinions regarding the news content rather than argue with other people. For example, news story No.1 was about a proposal. It was almost universally supported by readers, and most comments were responding to the news content to express their support. In news story No.4, a proposal strongly opposed by the readers, 71% of the comments were in response to news content, expressing disagreement and dissatisfaction with the proposal.

Triggering stories were examined individually and across cases to see patterns that might explain triggering effects.

1. Nationalism

Nationalism is one possible trigger for the first five news stories as listed in Table 15. The researcher defines nationalism as a collective identity that derives its power from tradition and the State, different from race, language, religion, etc. Nationalism can be represented in different forms and will be discussed in the following five news stories.

To some extent, nationalism is a strong weapon to be used to support the State. Many observed that whenever the State was challenged, or people perceived it was challenged, nationalism rose. This has derived from the injustices that China suffered in recent history, in particular, China's domination by foreign powers from the 19th century until the end of World War II, the most tragic and humiliating of which was Japan's invasion and occupation of parts of China in the late 1930s. The bitter recollection of China's suffering from that continues to be a source of Chinese nationalistic sentiment.

The first two news stories are both related to Japanese issues. The former story was about two National Committee members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference suggesting that a public memorial ceremony be held annually at the national level to mourn and commemorate the Nanjing massacre, which refers to the widespread atrocities committed by the Japanese Army in Nanjing, China, in 1937. War crimes committed included looting, rape, arson, and the killing of civilians and prisoners of war during that episode. China's official estimate for the non-combatant death toll in the Nanjing

massacre is 300,000. This news received 6,423 comments in just three days. Most comments were supporting the proposal.

The second story was about Japan's approval of its junior high school history textbooks that whitewash Japanese aggression in Asia. Like the first story, this one also aroused incredible anti-Japanese sentiment — 4,235 responses in five days. These nationalists took advantage of the free space on the Internet to express their attitudes toward Japan. They denounced Japan and advocated boycotts of Japanese goods on the BBS and sought to alter the government's policies toward Japan.

The suspicion of foreign powers and opposition to any implication of inferior status might invoke nationalism. The third news story was that a woman, a post doctoral researcher from Shanghai Jiaotong University, was beaten by a hotel security person and detained by police when she attended an International meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii. Though this news is deviant enough to attract many responses, it also involved some nationalism. The respondents' comments appeared to indicate that people treated this case not as a single event or accident but as a safety issue for all overseas Chinese. Heated debates focused on if there was racism, especially to Chinese, and if Americans really respect human rights as they claim. Interestingly, quite a number of the comments were rather rational, perhaps because the United States is famous for its democracy and judicial system and, additionally, because more and more Chinese have received their education in the United States. Although there was nationalistic sentiment on the BBS calling for solidarity of the Chinese, many questioned if the woman had engaged some improper behavior violating the law or resulting in a misunderstanding between the two parties. Some people even felt that the misbehavior of this woman made Chinese lose face.

While China at one point rejected its cultural heritage, rapid economic development has caused it to find renewed confidence in traditional culture and nationalism. In China, both the government and the public are reconstructing culture and identities to cope with a changing domestic and international environment. Under this circumstance, news stories like No. 4, a proposal that suggested changing the Spring Festival—the most important Chinese holiday—to a fixed date will definitely ignite public discontentment and trigger many responses. This news received 3,291 responses in two days.

Along with some other Chinese holidays, the Spring Festival is determined by the lunar calendar rather than the Gregorian calendar. The public thinks there is no reason to change the time of this holiday. Most comments criticized the proposal and the experts who initiated the proposal. Readers argued that the Spring Festival is one of the most important Chinese traditions and one of the few remaining. This old tradition symbolizes Chinese culture, and its meaning cannot be calculated by economic benefits. In addition, many people believed the Spring Festival makes an important connection among Chinese worldwide. If only mainland China changes its celebration day, this change will undoubtedly undermine the bond of overseas Chinese with the mainland, negatively affecting their feelings.

News story No. 5 shows that sports can also involve nationalism. When looking at the comments of this NBA news, which lasted 84 days and attracted a total number of 34,686 comments during the time, far more comments than other sports news, the researcher found that those comments actually were not responding to a single news story, but to each week's NBA news with Yao Ming or the Houston Rockets. No matter whether the editors of the BBS site purposely or accidentally put those entire comments together under a single news

item, the researcher decided to treat this as a whole, a triggering event. The reason for this is that Yao Ming himself is a trigger.

Although the NBA game's landfall in China can be traced back decades, the game achieved its unprecedented popularity in China when Yao debuted in the NBA. Yao's regular-season NBA games regularly attract up to 30 million viewers in China, making the Houston Rockets China's favorite team – and the world's most watched. While the commissioner of the NBA saw Yao as an opportunity to increase audience size by tapping the vast China market, Chinese youth may have thought differently. Millions of Yao's fans celebrate him as a patriotic icon that smashes the stereotype of the weak and diminutive Chinese and shows how China can compete against the best in the world. Even in the United States his Asian fans believe he offers an image of China that has nothing to do with Chairman Mao or the Tiananmen Square event.

2. Sharp class resentment and a widening gap between rich and poor

The sharp class resentment and a widening gap between rich and poor accompanying reform within China might contribute to the triggering effects of news events like No. 6, No. 7, and No. 8. The rapid pace of China's economic growth has been remarkable. However, the party's emphasis on economic growth rather than progress toward a more open and democratic society has produced many financial and social problems, such as worsening inequality and rampant government official corruption. Many people, including the underprivileged, have not benefited from the reform, although they were supposed to. Therefore, the netizens are very sensitive to cases that reveal wrongs or perceived wrongs by the government and the rich.

News story No.6 was about a hit-and-run accident. The fact that the accident involved a little girl who was hit and dragged by the car for almost 3,000 meters to her death was deviant enough; however, the brand of the vehicle, a Lincoln, was another trigger, readers' comments indicated. The Lincoln vehicle became a symbol of the rich. Most people accused the rich and the powerful of trampling on the underprivileged.

This story had lasted 31 days when the researcher collected it. Immediately after the news was released, the BBS was full of furious responses from people urging the police to catch the driver as soon as possible and commenting that he should definitely be tortured to death and deserved a death penalty in front of the public. The driver was caught three days later, and in a TV interview he confessed that he was not rich; the Lincoln was borrowed from a friend, and he didn't know the girl was still under the car when he ran away. However, many people doubted what he said and speculated that he was a rich person's surrogate because he neither looked like he would have a Lincoln nor have some rich friend who would lend him a Lincoln, according to his job and educational background. For some time, rumors and facts mixed together on the BBS.

Perhaps because of the pressure from the public and the media, the court speeded its processing, making its final decision within one month—a death sentence to the young man. This penalty is far more severe than previous equivalent cases. It is not surprising that the decision aroused a new round of online discussion. Some people were satisfied with the result, while others said that if the judicial independence and genuine rule of law in China were expected, the public and the media should refrain from taking justice into their hands or imposing inappropriate influence on the judiciary—they must let the courts do their job.

News story No. 7 was about a high-ranking government official's corruption. Zhan Enzhao, the chairman of the China Construction Bank, which is one of the country's top four state-owned banks, was suspected of bribery. Even without knowing the final outcome of the investigation, netizens heatedly commented on the BBS, including feeling glad for the uncovering of this corruption, feeling worried about other possible massive uncovered ones, offering analysis for the underlying reasons for corruption—the unconstrained power of high-ranking officials and so on. Most interesting, the largest percentage of comments was posted by the staff of the China Construction bank from different branch offices. They complained of their low salary and the intensive workload, which was in strong contrast to the official's bribery and luxury life.

News story No. 8 was also related the wrongs or dereliction of duty of government officials. A villager in Si Chuan province rescued 19 passengers who suffered a traffic accident and fell into a lake on a cold winter day. After that, Jin, the hero, caught pulmonary disease because of soaking in the cold water too long. Unfortunately, several months later, his disease transformed to lung cancer. During his illness, Jin spent all his savings and could not continue the therapy, so he asked for help from the local government, but no one responded until a reporter accidentally found Jin's heroic action and reported about it. Since then, some officials visited Jin and promised to provide free medical treatment to him. However, it was too late to save Jin. He died the day after their visit. The public was sad about the hero's death and angry with the government officials who refused to offer help initially. Readers denounced those officials for not fulfilling their responsibilities. Furthermore, they called for the government to set a public fund to commend and compensate people for altruistic action.

3. *Sports*

Sports are a universal favorite. Three of the thirteen triggering stories, No.9, No.10, and the previously discussed NBA story were all sports related. Unlike other triggering stories, sports news regarding important matches regularly attract large and relatively constant responses. News story No. 9 was a report about AC Milan defeating Manchester United in the 1/8 final competition of the Championship Cup. As the number one sport in the world, soccer is watched by billions and played by millions. European clubs, whose primary fans were at one time almost exclusively from their respective neighborhoods, are now backed by entire continents, due to the recent developments in digital and satellite telecommunications that have provided fans in Asia televised coverage of European League matches.

While China has only slightly more than ten years of history with its own professional soccer league, there are numerous soccer fans from adults to adolescents, and people's attraction to and interest in soccer can be traced back several decades. In China, it is not surprising to find a group of school students passionately and authoritatively discussing who scored what goal in what minute of the previous night's match or who is getting transferred to which team and at what cost. The names of team players on teams such as Liverpool are at their fingertips. This particular news story received 3,428 comments in four days. People basically commented on comparisons between predictions and the results of the game, appraisals on the performance of the stars, defending and arguing on behalf of their favorite team, and providing in-depth analysis for the championship situation.

News story No.10 was also about a championship cup, specifically for the game of Go, in which the Chinese player defeated a Korean player in first round. Go is a fascinating ancient board game that originated in China thousands of years ago. It has simple elements—crossed lines on the board and black and white for the board game piece. With simple rules, Go generates subtleties seen as an analogy of life, a mirror of one's personality, and an abstract reasoning. Having captivated players for thousands of years, Go is played today by millions in Japan, Korea, China. News story No.10 received 5,024 comments in seven days. Similar to news No.9, this story received comments all around the competition, such as evaluation of players' performance, speculation on the final result, and personal fondness about a particular player.

4. Other random factors

There were also some seemingly random factors that caused a large response, such as a particular wording used by the reporter or additional information provided by readers and posted on the BBS. News story No. 11 is an example. The story itself was a heroic story: A migrant worker sacrificed his life to save two children from a railroad accident. However, because the reporter wrote a "He Nan (a province of China) migrant worker . . .", quite a few comments debated the attributes of He Nan Ren (people from He Nan province) as a collective identity. This might have been due to previous negative reports regarding He Na Ren, to longer-term stereotypes.

Another example of randomly triggered results is news story No. 3. In that case, some readers living in the United States provided addition information on the BBS about what they read in a Chinese newspaper circulated in the United States. This additional

information provided by a reader triggered a large response. However, some information might trigger a response while other information might not.

Besides the four types of possible triggers discussed above, there were two news stories, No.12 and No.13 for which the research did not identify triggers other than newsworthiness-cultural significance. For example, No. 12 was a preview for the annual Spring Festival Gala, the four-hour-plus variety show to be broadcast on the Chinese New Year's Eve. It is a Chinese tradition, loaded with significant cultural significance, for families to get together on the eve, eating dumplings and watching the gala, which is a blend of comedy, singing, dancing and wishing. Throughout the 22,632 comments, people expressed their feelings regarding a particular performance or a performer they liked. People expressed their expectations about which celebrities they wished to see on the show beforehand and gave their appraisals of the performance later on. Similarly, news story No.13 generated many responses only because of its prominent cultural significance to younger people.

Table 15. Triggering stories with number of comments, duration, and their newsworthiness

	New item	Total Number of comments	Duration	Newsworthiness and the score
1	Some Committee members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference suggest holding a national ceremony each year in memory of the Nanjing Massacre in 1937	6,423	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Political significance (4) ♦ Statistical deviance (3)
2	Japanese modified its junior high school history textbook to whitewash its aggression in China	4,235	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Political significance (4) ♦ Statistical Deviance (3)
3	A Chinese woman, a post-doctoral researcher, was beaten by a hotel security guard while abroad, attending an international conference in Hawaii	4,103	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Statistical deviance (4)
4	Public criticized proposal to change the lunar-calendar-based Chinese New Year to a fixed date	3,291	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Cultural significance-importance (4)
5	Preview for five NBA games in the following day	34,686	84	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Cultural significance (3)
6	Severe hit-and-run car accident by a Lincoln vehicle	4, 843	31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Statistical deviance (4) ♦ Normative deviance (4)

7	Chairman of China Construct Bank is under investigation for economic criminal activity	3,578	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Statistical deviance (4) ◆ Normative deviance (4) ◆ Political significance (3) ◆ Economic significance (4)
8	Villager died a half year after rescuing 19 passengers from cold water in winter time	4,238	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Statistical deviance (4)
9	Report on Championship Cup: AC Milan defeated Manchester United in the 1/8 final competition	3,428	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cultural significance (3)
10	World Championship Cup of the Game Go: Chinese player defeated Korean player in the first round	5,024	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cultural significance-Interest (3)
11	Migrant worker sacrificed his life while saving two kids	3,707	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Statistical deviance (3)
12	Preview for the annual Spring Festival Gala show on Central China TV	22,631	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cultural significance (4)
13	Preview of a TV drama adapted from a popular video game	12,289	76	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cultural significance (3)

Table 16. Triggering stories with number of comments analyzed and comments type

	New item	Comments Analyzed	Comments responding
1	Some Committee members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference suggest holding a national ceremony each year in memory of the Nanjing Massacre in 1937	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 79% ◆ To others' comments: 21%
2	Japanese modified its junior high school history textbook to whitewash its aggression in China	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 58% ◆ To others' comments: 42%
3	A Chinese woman, a post- doctoral researcher, was beaten by a hotel security guard while abroad, attending an international conference in Hawaii	400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 48% ◆ To others' comments: 52%
4	Public criticized proposal to change the lunar-calendar- based Chinese New Year to a fixed date	400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 71% ◆ To others' comments: 29%
5	Preview for five NBA games in the following day	800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 56% ◆ To others' comments: 44%
6	Severe hit-and-run car accident by a Lincoln vehicle	800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 58% ◆ To others' comments: 42%

7	Chairman of China Construct Bank is under investigation for economic criminal activity	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 51% ◆ To others' comments: 49%
8	Villager died a half year after rescuing 19 passengers from cold water in winter time.	400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 61% ◆ To others' comments: 39%
9	Report on Championship Cup: AC Milan defeated Manchester United in the 1/8 final competition	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 55% ◆ To others' comments: 45%
10	A world Championship Cup of the Game Go: Chinese player defeated Korean player in the first round	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 47% ◆ To others' comments: 53%
11	Migrant worker sacrificed his own life while saving two kids	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 61% ◆ To others' comments: 39%
12	Preview for the annual Spring Festival Gala show on Central China TV	800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 55% ◆ To others' comments: 45%
13	Preview of a TV drama adapted from a popular video game	800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To news content: 41% ◆ To others' comments: 59%

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explain patterns of interactivity between readers and mass media via the electronic Bulletin Board System (BBS). Specifically, three research goals were to examine the extent to which China's BBS system has increased audience interactivity by those getting their news from the websites, to examine whether newsworthiness criteria often used by journalists to determine what stories run and how they are placed also might be used by responding readers, and to examine what factors trigger a huge response of those highly interactive news stories.

Main Issue

Using the concept of interactivity, triggering events, and Shoemaker's theory of newsworthiness as the theoretical basis, this study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to study interactivity via the BBS. Data collection was conducted over seven weeks to make a composite week. A total of 128 news stories were selected for the quantitative content analysis, and the 13 most highly interactive triggering stories were examined individually and across cases for patterns that might explain triggering effects.

The result for the first research goal is quite clear. A total 30,263 responses for the top hundred news items were received in 24 hours on a randomly selected day. The huge number of comments in response to news posted on BBS sites is substantially larger than any numbers previously reported for newspapers or any other traditional mass media. The BBS has greatly increased the amount of reader interactivity.

Regarding the quantitative content analysis, the overall results confirm the positive relationship between the newsworthiness of news items and readers' responses, suggesting that stories rating high in newsworthiness criteria lead to high levels of response by readers and that the public is more likely to respond to news items that have traditional news values used by journalists.

One-way ANOVA results supported all the six hypotheses, and three of them achieved a .001 significance level. The most pronounced difference between the top group and the bottom group was found in the cultural significance measure, followed by the statistical deviance measure and political significance measure. It appears that the differences in social change deviance and normative deviance, and economic significance between groups are smaller than the other three measures.

Results also reveal that it is not necessary for a news story to have several types of newsworthiness to receive much response. Even with only one type of newsworthiness, a news story with a very high score (score=3 or 4) can stimulate a huge response. However, if a news story has more than one type of newsworthiness, it may have better opportunity to receive more responses.

Interestingly, all news items in the bottom group only had scores of one or two across six measures—none of them had a moderate (score=3) or major (score=4) deviance or social significance score. In addition, even in the top group no news item had all six types of newsworthiness; however, they all had at least one type of newsworthiness. The highest ones had five types of newsworthiness. The most frequent category for the top group was two types of newsworthiness, followed by one type of newsworthiness. For the bottom group, 41.4% of news items did not have any news value (score=1), and 50 % of the news had only

one type of newsworthiness. No news items in the group had more than three types of newsworthiness.

The results for the qualitative case studies show that newsworthiness is an important factor that triggers a huge response because all triggering stories are salient in terms of newsworthiness. Sometimes, newsworthiness alone is enough to explain the triggering effect, such as news stories No.12 and No.13, which triggered a lot of response only because of their cultural significance. However, sometimes other factors are involved. The researcher identified four types of factors that might explain the triggering effect. In the current situation of China, nationalism (five triggering stories), sharp class resentment and a widening gap between rich and poor (three triggering stories), and sports are the three major triggers (three triggering stories). The fourth is random triggers (two triggering stories), such as particular wording used by the reporter or additional information posted by the readers on the BBS. All these four types of factors, along with newsworthiness, are complementary in explaining why some news stories received a larger reader response than others.

The Significance of This Study

In contrast to other studies regarding interactivity, this study was not trying to define what interactivity is, but rather was investigating levels and causes of interactivity; it sought to answer the questions, “What causes people to respond to online news, and to what extent has the BBS increased audience interactivity?” Also different from other newsworthiness studies, this study examined newsworthiness from the readers’ perspective rather than from journalists’. Most especially, this study was conducted in the Chinese setting where prominent online interactivity occurs. Though the uniqueness of the media and

communication environment may affect the use of the BBS, China has the second largest number of people online in the world, behind only the United States, providing a valuable opportunity to further understand interactivity and the content being sent online in this new technology age.

The most important contribution of this study is that the results show that the newsworthiness criteria used by journalists seem to work well in predicting what news is going to generate responses by readers. News stories with higher newsworthiness do stimulate more reader response. In other words, the underlying criteria used by readers to respond to news are very similar to the criteria often used by journalists to determine what stories to run and how they are placed.

Another significant contribution of this study is the qualitative triggering analysis. Through the case studies, this study shows that news stories with extremely high newsworthiness cause great reader response, but the researcher also identified some specific areas that might contribute to the triggering effect. As shown in this study, nationalism, class resentment and the gap between rich and poor, sports and some random factors are important factors causing tremendous reader response in current China.

Limitations and Suggestion for Future Study

The biggest limitation of this study is the quality and availability of the data. Because the ranking, the number of comments, and the content of the comments were provided by the website, sometimes data was missing or there were errors. The grouping of stories in the same category was also a subjective decision of the editors of the website. Sometimes all aspects of a particular event were put into a category and the corresponding numbers of

comments were added together in the ranking, though they should not have been. For example, the numbers of comments for the NBA news (triggering story No.5) and for other sports news were counted differently. All reports relating to Yao Ming and the Houston Rocket's competition were put together under a single news item, making that news appear in the ranking for seven weeks. However, the number of comments for soccer news (triggering story No.9) included only the number of comments for that particular game between AC Milan and Manchester rather than all Championship competition reports.

Another limitation is the Bulletin Board System in China. Because the Chinese government has a filtering system that censors the content on the Internet, the BBS cannot cover all of the important issues in China. Therefore, there is a range of sensitive topics that are newsworthy but they do not show up on websites, so readers cannot respond to them. These sensitive topics are usually politically-related issues, including criticizing the central government or Communist Party, promoting subversion, or harming national security. However, the fine line between the political issues that can be criticized and that cannot be criticized is not very clear.

This study is somewhat exploratory. With improvement in the way in which the website keeps its data and with additional information provided by the website, future studies may be able to examine a longer period of time for data collection, using its monthly and yearly ranking of news to examine the relationship between newsworthiness and reader response. Especially regarding triggering analysis, further studies can choose to study the most interactive news stories of the year or, based on the identified possible triggers in this study, future researchers might pick one or two specific areas to study further.

Appendix
Coding Book

Deviance

Deviance was measured by using different variables: statistical deviance, social change deviance, and normative deviance.

The deviance code for each content element will be determined by the most deviant word, statement, sentence, or picture that can be identified.

1. STATISTICAL DEVIANCE

Statistical deviance refers to the likelihood of a news event actually happening, statistically speaking the difference from the mean. The more unlikely an event is to happen, the more statistically deviant it is.

Please indicate each content element's statistical deviance by using one of the following four categories:

- (1) This is common information that can be frequently
 - A local artist's exhibition
 - A win by the conference-leading basketball team
 - The introduction of a TV drama plot
- (2) This is somewhat unusual information, which can be found occasionally
 - A merger involving two famous companies.
 - An agreement reached between two antagonistic countries
 - A break up of a celebrity couple
- (3) This is unusual information that can rarely be found
 - A mass accident involving many cars that leads to the death of several people
 - A Chinese movie honored in the Academy Awards.
 - The escape of animals from a zoo
- (4) This information is extremely unusual and totally unexpected.
 - The biggest tornado or typhoon that ever hit the area
 - A 20% stock market increase or decrease in one day
 - Discovery of a large political corruption scandal uncovered.

2. SOCIAL CHANGE DEVIANCE

Social change deviance refers to an event's potential to threaten or change the status quo in a city, region, country, or in the international system. Status quo is defined as the existing power structure, i.e., the "powers that be."

Please indicate each content element's social change deviance by using one of the following four categories:

- (1) The information provided is not at all threatening to the status quo.
 - A soccer game
 - The result of a local survey regarding household eating habits
 - A car accident
- (2) The information provided represents a minimal threat to the status quo
 - The raising of tuition fees in universities
 - A change of regional regulation on investment
 - A disclosure of disparities of wealth
- (3) The information provided represents a moderate threat to the status quo
 - An agreement among countries regarding a regional safety problem
 - A change of birth control policy executed nationwide
 - A call for cross-straits peace negotiations by the government
- (4) The information provided represents a major threat to the status quo
 - The election of a new central government
 - A terrorist bombing of the National People's Congress building
 - The passing of a new law to protect the freedom of the press

3. NORMATIVE DEVIANCE

Normative deviance refers to a behavior, attitude, or opinion that violates or breaks a social collective's existing norms, rules, or laws.

Please indicate each content element's normative deviance by using one of the following four categories:

- (1) The information provided does not violate any norms or laws
 - A national soccer league game
 - A merger of two international media corporations
 - A regular national conference
- (2) The information provided represents a minimal violation of one or more norms or laws.
 - The obligation of students to go to school during winter break and pay tuition
 - The discrimination against people without higher education or from rural areas
 - A new regulation allows foreigners to be civil servants

- (3) The information provided represents a moderate violation of one or more norms or laws.
- Cheating on the national college entrance test
 - The beating of someone on the street
 - The disregard of labor laws by foreign companies
- (4) The information provided represents a major violation of one or more norms or laws.
- A hit-and-run accident
 - A bank robbery, kidnapping, or murder
 - The disclosure of government officials taking bribes

Social Significance

Social significance was measured by using three variables: political significance, economic significance, and cultural significance.

The three social significance variables have to be coded separately for each content element.

1. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A news item's **political significance** indicates the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on the relationship between people and governments, including the judicial, legislative, and executive subsystems.

To determine how politically significant a news item is, it has to be considered whether it is located at the local, regional, national, or international level.

To indicate a news item's degree of political significance, please use one of the following four categories:

- (1) The information provided is not at all politically significant.
 - Any story that has NO potential or actual impact on politically relevant events or persons
- (2) The information provided is of minimal political significance.
 - The visits of the premier to a series of European countries
 - The speeding up of un-pirated software use urged by government
 - The launch of emergency measures to check pollution of rivers

- (3) The information provided is of moderate political significance
 - A new law to improve the civil servant system
 - A nationwide campaign to promote fairness among law-enforcement departments at various levels
 - An adjustment of the governmental administrative examination and approval system
- (4) The information provided is of major political significance
 - The election of a new central government
 - The corruption of high-ranking government officials
 - The incarceration of a journalist for leaking top state secrets

2. ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE

The **economic significance** of a news item refers to the extent to which the content of the news item has potential or actual impact on the exchange of goods and services, including the monetary system, business, tariffs, labor, transportation, job markets, resources, and infrastructure.

To indicate a news item's degree of economic significance, please use one of the following four categories:

- (1) The information provided is not at all economically significant
 - Any story that has NO potential or actual impact on economically relevant events or persons
- (2) The information provided is of minimal economic significance.
 - A domestic company's listing its initial public offering (IPO)
 - A foreign company's investment in a new research and development(R&D) center
 - A slide in profit of a major domestic company
- (3) The information provided is of moderate economic significance.
 - The raise of the electricity price nationwide
 - A loan aiding agriculture by the World Bank
 - A world conference on the Chinese economy
- (4) The information provided is of major economic significance.
 - China's entering into the World Trade Organization (WTO)
 - A shift in currency policy, like exchange rates or interest rates
 - Extreme stock market changes, like increasing 20% in one day

3. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Cultural significance can be identified as the extent to which the content of a news item has potential or actual impact on a social system's traditions, institutions, and norms, such as religion, ethnicity, and arts. In determining a news item's degree of cultural significance, the item's geographical relevance should be taken into account.

To indicate a news item's degree of cultural significance, please use one of the following four categories:

- (1) The information provided is not at all culturally significant.
 - Any story that has NO potential or actual impact on culturally relevant events or persons
- (2) The information provided is of minimal cultural significance
 - A reverse cultural shock among returnees
 - A new university ranking
 - An unspoiled mummy being unearthed
- (3) The information provided is of moderate cultural significance
 - The application of traditional Chinese medicine for world heritage
 - The refusal of a university to allow a gay film festival
 - The death of a famous artist
- (4) The information provided is of major cultural significance
 - The marriage of an 82-year-old scientist with a 28-year-old woman
 - A thorough reform of the normal education system in China
 - Chinese film honored in The Academy Awards.

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